

“A Savior Who Grieves”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
All Saints’ Day – November 1, 2015

**John 11: 32-44**

One of the things we have talked about in our GriefShare support group this fall is the effect death has on us can be very strong and unpredictable. For many of us, death is something we fear, something that we resist and hope will never come to us or to someone close to us. It appears to be the end of life, the sudden closure of years of happiness, adventure, and fullness of living. When death comes, we feel afraid, scared, shocked, saddened, grieved, and empty. We may cry our hearts out, or we may go on with our routine, blocking out our grief for sometime later. It changes our identity – we are no longer someone’s child, someone’s spouse, someone’s sibling. It is a very powerful force, because it seems from our mortal and human perspective that there is nothing beyond its grasp.

The Jews who came to console Mary and Martha were no doubt saddened at the death of their brother, Lazarus. Mary and Martha were no doubt grief-stricken by the death of their brother, as well. Yet they also had emotions of anger and resentment toward Jesus. Earlier in this story from John, they had made a point of getting word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, and needed the healing touch that only Jesus could provide. When Jesus did not arrive in time, they let him know how they felt: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). We could compare their anger at Jesus to the anger or frustration we may feel toward a doctor who is unable to save our loved one: “How could you let him die? You said you could save him!”

In a deeper sense, death is a sign of our own mortality and humanness. It is a force that brings into plain view our inability to change everything for good. We cannot prevent death, for it is an inevitable part of living. And yet we so often feel helpless in the face of death because we think we can change so many things. But death is unchangeable. It cannot be reversed. We are forced to cope and live and deal with its outcome. Perhaps that is why at times of death, we feel shocked and confused and out-of-sorts. It is not something we humans deal with very well, and our emotions usually run the gamut in its aftermath.

If there is one trait of this story from John that stands out, it is the human side of Jesus that is so apparent. Leading up to his arrival at Bethany, Jesus continually says that Lazarus’ death was so that the glory of God might be shown through him. But once he meets Martha and Mary, and observes the Jews with them weeping and grieving for

Lazarus, something changes in Jesus. “He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (11:33). Then we read that as he moves toward the tomb, he openly weeps and continues to be greatly disturbed. For some reason, Jesus’ demeanor changes from calm and determined to upset and somber once he arrives at Lazarus’ tomb. It is one of the few instances in the gospels when the human side of Jesus is revealed to us.

Whenever we affirm our faith in God, we profess that we believe in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who is fully human, fully divine. Jesus is both one of us and not one of us. He felt and thought and walked and talked like one of us. Yet in his human life he was God Incarnate, the one who gave us a glimpse of who God is and how much God loves all of us. When we read that Jesus wept over Lazarus, that he was greatly disturbed in his mind and spirit, we affirm our faith in a God who cares, who loves, who grieves, who shares the depth of our emotions and is not immune to the pain which we feel. That does not mean we believe in a weak God. Rather, it means we believe in a God who is so strong, he sacrificed his Son so that we might live a new and amazing life.

What makes Jesus seem even more human in this story is possibly the fact that in Lazarus’ death, he foresaw his own death that was to come. The mourners all around him, the stone covering the tomb — death seemed to be very much in control in Bethany. Perhaps this is when Jesus knew death was in his near future. Perhaps he realized that what lay ahead would be painful and excruciating. He must have been at least scared, or fearful, or anxious about his future. Death was everywhere. There seemed to be no escaping its grip.

In the midst of such sadness and despair and darkness, Jesus gives life. He has made it clear from the beginning of the story that Lazarus’ death is not meant for sadness, but rather “for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” (11:4). He has overcome many obstacles to reach this point at the tomb: the disciples’ misunderstanding and confusion, the Jews’ skepticism at his loyalty and power, Martha’s wish not to roll the stone away because of the foul odor of the body. He pushes ahead through all of these obstacles, for nothing will prevent God’s will from occurring in this place. He has already told Martha what he is there for: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11:25). That is his purpose in this world, and he has come to show it. Amid all the death that surrounds him, Jesus provides life: “Lazarus, come out!” And his friend came out of the tomb, wrapped in the same cloths that he would be wrapped in later for his own burial.

It is very easy for us to think there is nothing after death, nothing after this life, nothing after the emotions and experiences and people of this world. It is difficult to believe in something that we cannot see or

taste or touch or hear. But in the foul odor of death, in the torn pieces of cloth wrapped around his body, in the loud voice of Jesus calling out — in the raising of Lazarus we smell, see, and hear the promise of eternal life. It is a promise that Jesus is prepared to offer to us if we believe that he is the resurrection and the life.

Today is All Saints' Day, when we give thanks to God for the lives of those in our congregation, our families, and our lives who have died in the past year and now are in God's heavenly kingdom. The candles on the communion table represent those in our church we will remember today. There may be friends, family members, neighbors, and others who come to your mind when you consider the saints of faith for you. For me, this is a day that reaffirms my trust in a God who will always hold me in all times of life: good and bad, joyful and sad, happy and grieving. And it is a day when I know, and you know, and the church knows that even though our loved ones may not be physically with us in our lives, they are always and forever with our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. "For nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Thanks be to God for the Savior who grieves with us, who stays with us, and who invites us to believe in Him, "the way, the truth, and the life." Amen.